

## CONNECTING THE DOTS

### An Examination of Sexual Violence within Human Trafficking in the Context of the United States' Racialized History

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#### A Personal Message

Drawing attention to what is wrong is easier than recalling what is good and finding fault is far easier than finding solutions. It is easier to burn bridges than build them.

Accountability builds bridges. Accountability invites candid and constructive communication. It invites others to take responsibility for harm and is a step towards repair.

**This paper examines the popular anti-trafficking movement and offers ways it must change. It is an invitation for reflection and action as we consider together some of the ways white voices dominate the current "popular" antitrafficking culture, and how it causes harm.**

Nor am I a survivor of human trafficking, but I have walked alongside many who are. Their stories and voices are my inspiration and primary sources that has illuminated for me how popular human trafficking narratives do not reflect all survivors' experiences.

My identity as a southern, white, married female with children, a follower of the Christian faith, has shaped my experience of the antitrafficking movement. I have worked hard like so many others, yet I did not have to fight my way to get access to networks and seats at many tables like so many others. **I acknowledge my inherited advantages of white culture and approach this work holding that tension as I wade into some deep waters writing about human trafficking, US slavery, and Black youth.** I do so with reverence and as one who stands outside of that experience, working through my own implicit biases.

To those whose backgrounds like mine, I invite you accept the discomfort that is very natural to feel and connect with what you probably deep down know is true but don't know how to talk about these things.



I also ask you to especially think about how we tend to assume the white perspective is the only reasonable and objective one, and how that assumption is masked by our perspective of what is "normal," or "the way things are." Why is this so? Why is it important?

*Because the outcries and stories of those most impacted by the injustice of human trafficking are labeled as biased, emotional, and incomplete until we have validated or platformed them. My friends, **it is this tendency that keeps real violence unnoticed, unnamed, and unfelt by those who hold the power to do something about it.***

This is a work of love because of survivors, because of the beauty of justice without partiality, and because I want to honor my Creator God. This is an invitation to walk a better path: to speak truth, to call in and not cancel, and to cordially divest from whites only spaces of power and leadership in the antitrafficking field.

**My purpose in this paper is to pull back the curtain on human trafficking to show how antitrafficking pop culture perpetuates the very harm we claim we are trying to stop.** This is not about fault finding for its own sake: it's about widening our field of vision so that we can redirect our work where the greatest need lies while discovering and building bridges with other change makers who are already and have always doing the work.

Grace and peace,  
CD



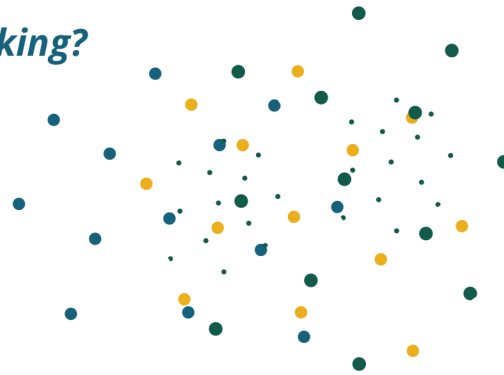
popular human trafficking narratives do not reflect all survivors' experiences

## INTRODUCTION

### *What does it mean to fight human trafficking?*

What does it mean to fight human trafficking? What does it mean to rescue victims? And where do we go for answers to these questions?

Popular narratives about what it means to “fight” human trafficking have developed apart from the voices, experiences, and the body of work that represents all survivors of sexual violence and human trafficking. The current human trafficking, or “antitrafficking” movement has not drawn from a comprehensive historical understanding of the root causes of violence and injustice. For example:



• Human trafficking does not exist within a neatly identifiable and “screen-able” set of circumstances outside of a more complex system and spectrum of deprivation, maltreatment, and abuse.



• Sexual violence within human trafficking, is not the result of individual behaviors and choices that is disconnected from other forms of violence and larger realities of culture and history.



Violence, particularly sexual violence occurs at every point in a trafficked survivors’ experience[1] in ways that are complex, systemic, and interconnected with other forms of violence.

Popular victim responses center services for immediate rescue and relocation do not consider the trauma from sexual violence. In fact, the cumulation of trauma from sexual violence experienced across a lifetime remains “in the background” of protocols and human trafficking-specific service models.

So even though sexual assault services are not always represented in human trafficking protocols, survivors who are trafficked for their labor or services are rarely outside the scope of sexual violence advocacy programs and services. Trafficked survivors deserve the opportunity to process their trauma with safe and confidential advocates who understand the prevalence of trauma from sexual violence on a variety of levels, including human trafficking.

Additionally, popular victim response protocols are also overly reliant on and loyal to the criminal legal system that prioritize strategies to keep a victim detained and “safe,” apart from how the victim is defining safety for themselves. Survivors experience pressure to testify against their trafficker and threats of incarceration if they don’t. Antitrafficking “advocates” are often complicit with this pressure even though it is never appropriate for victim service organizations to represent any other interests but that of the survivor, and unfortunately, success tends to highlight the trafficker’s punishment at the expense of the survivor’s stated wishes.

This paper draws connections between the prevalence of sexual violence, human trafficking, the popular “Rescue” service model, and how that keeps us from a comprehensive understanding of the scope of human trafficking and survivor experience. We will look more closely at who sexual violence and human trafficking most impacts and consider what that means for anti-trafficking efforts.

1] Stöckl H, Fabbri C, Cook H, Galez-Davis C, Grant N, Lo Y, Kiss L, Zimmerman C. Human trafficking and violence: Findings from the largest global dataset of trafficking survivors. J Migr Health. 2021 Nov 16;4:100073. doi: 10.1016/j.jmh.2021.100073. PMID: 34888537; PMCID: PMC8637135.



Sexual violence within human trafficking is often misunderstood as individual behaviors and choices disconnected from other forms of violence and larger realities of culture and history

## INTRODUCTION (CON'D)

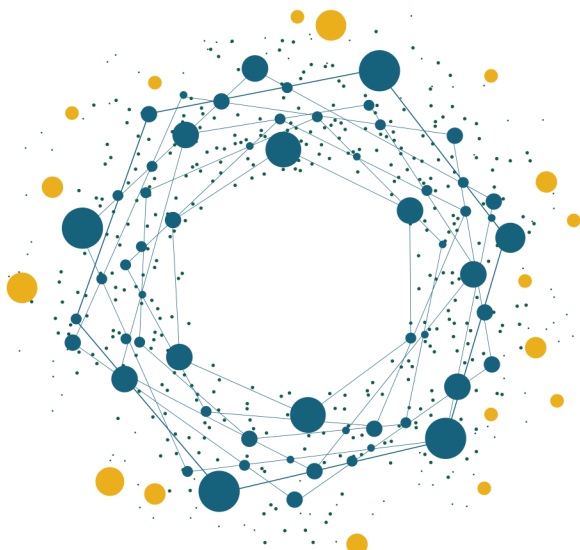
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Then we will consider our racialized history in terms of sexual violence and human trafficking. It is critical to understand the impact of slavery's legacy in the US and its connection to Black women and girls' overrepresentation in sexual violence and sex trafficking [1] which demands examination that is more than a bullet point on a Human Trafficking 101 presentation slide.

In fact, until we fuller consider and include the historical record to draw connections between human trafficking and US race-based chattel slavery—how it has shaped popular responses to human trafficking and survivors, and how it has impacted the experience of Black girls in the US in terms of trafficking—we are reacting to only a very small part of the problem disconnected from any real solution.

**Therefore, "fighting" human trafficking is reaching towards justice and a world free from sexual violence. It is a fight that is worthy of all of us.**

<sup>1</sup><https://www.nbwji.org/post/black-women-girls-gender-based-violence-pathways-criminalization-incarceration>



### **An Examination of Sexual Violence within Human Trafficking in the Context of the United States' Racialized History**

#### **PART ONE**

The Prevalence of Sexual Violence

The Interconnection of Sexual Violence and Human Trafficking

Examining the "Rescue" Framework

#### **PART TWO**

Human Trafficking Prevalence and Disparities

Alarming Disparities and Anti-Black Racism

#### **PART THREE**

Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Black Girls in the Context of US's Racialized History

- The Adultification of Black Girls
- The Racialization of Antitrafficking Narratives

Recommendation for Action

Email [info@nccasa.org](mailto:info@nccasa.org) to request a pdf of this paper.